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ABSTRACT

In plain language, these six ready-to-copy briefs state what researchers and practitioners have learned about various ways parents can help their children do well in school. "Calculating the Risks: When Should Parents Add or Subtract?" discusses the normal risks of life, the intensification of risk by poverty, and how parents can keep children safe and help them to exercise good judgment. "The Hoopla about Thinking and Creativity" defines creative and critical thinking and discusses ways that parents can encourage both. "The Courage Required of Adolescents" examines the main tasks of adolescent development. "Practical Morals for Parents and Teens in the Age of AIDS" discusses responsible sexual behavior and moral values. "Playing for Keeps: Imagination and Young Children" explains the importance of play both for child development and for learning to use the power of imagination into adulthood. "What Did You Expect?" examines potential positive and negative outcomes of teacher expectations of students. (SV)

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Calculating the Risks: When Should Parents Add or Subtract?

Often, it's *good* to be a risk-taker. If you develop a reputation as a "risk-taker," it probably means that you're a survivor. You have calculated your risks wisely and benefitted. In fact, we all need to learn how to take risks wisely.

Wisdom comes from experience with the calculated judgments we make about risk. With a little luck, we learn from the risks we take, whether we win or lose. But some risks are such bad bets that little good can come of them. If somebody chooses to take these kinds of risks anyway, it's poor judgment. The chances of becoming wiser can actually *decrease* as a result of taking such risks.

If you think about it, you can see that life itself is a calculated risk. Perhaps if we knew all the risks in advance, none of us would decide to have children. We can't know all the risks, but we *do know* that children are wonderful and essential if our world is to endure.

Parents bear a great burden of responsibility in assessing risks. All children need to be protected from some risks; some children need more protection than others; and still others are threatened by more risks than others. At the same time, children need to learn healthy ways of meeting life's risks.

Certainly, illness has become less of a threat to our children, but the twentieth century has also brought distressing changes to families and communities. These changes are associated with new threats from guns, from drugs, and from a decline of neighborliness. And political upheavals around the world have been horrible. The world may be a more dangerous place than ever, in some important ways.

Of course, poverty—because of the circumstances into which it thrusts people—always intensifies the risks that come with living. It's simply not fair that some children get born into situations that are very dangerous, while others confront far fewer threats.

Sadly, as the threats increase, adequate protections from them are harder to come by and they are more complicated. This means that if poor parents are to protect their children adequately, they have to do a lot more than rich parents. This is a dramatic problem for any society, especially one that cherishes democratic ideals. Failing to care for our children—all our children—is the same as failing to care for the world.

What's the solution? It's true that no magic can protect children from the risks of just living on this earth. But there are some things individuals can do, and there are some things society as a whole ought to be doing.

Parent networks, community watch groups, and other neighborhood efforts take work and courage, but they have been effective in many communities in reducing crime and keeping children safe. When people look out for each others' children, threats are minimized systematically. And, as individuals, parents can teach their children rules to keep them safe (not answering the door when home alone, learning to dial the 911 emergency number, not talking to or accepting "gifts" from strangers, and so forth).

But parents also need to understand the bigger picture. Peer pressure, easy thrills, and escapism—these things can tempt children and youth to run foolish risks. No rules will protect a child or young person bent on self-destruction. Because of inexperience, also, children are especially prone to poor judgment. Open, frequent, and honest communication among parents and children is probably the key to helping young people exercise good judgment.

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, which developed this article, can provide a useful bibliography of resources about this topic. All resources listed in the bibliography are available from the Educational Resources Information Center. Just call 1-800/624-9120 or send an E-mail message to lanhamb@ael.org. To find out more about the ERIC system and its services, call ACCESS ERIC at 1-800/LET-ERIC.

The Hoopla About Thinking and Creativity

From every corner, it is proclaimed: "Lo! The twenty-first century is upon us! Wake up, citizens." We hear that the coming century will require higher levels of thinking skills and creativity from all of us—or else.

Many of us think that the world always has—and always will—require citizens who develop their wit and keep it about them at all times. For instance, it sure looks like the twentieth century could have avoided some evils (war and famine on a large scale) if we humans had been more thoughtful and creative. Let us, indeed, hope that the next century will be different.

No one is too sure where the change to the "information age" will lead, but it makes many of us pretty nervous. In these difficult times, the ability to think and to act creatively will surely be important, as it has always been. The current problem seems to be that the kind of schools created for the twentieth century have outlived their usefulness.

Maybe schools of the future *will* both teach the basics and nurture the more subtle abilities, such as thoughtfulness and creativity. Maybe schools will teach such things *better* and *to more students*. But there is much that parents can do while waiting for the millennium.

Children learn best by example and by doing. American Indian cultures—not surprisingly—have long understood this idea. But most of our schools teach by lecture and paper-and-pencil testing. So right now, homes can offer a good additional place to develop the habits of thinking critically and acting creatively.

Frank Smith, who writes about thinking, claims that there is not much difference between "creative thinking" and "critical thinking." According to him, thinking is thinking. There are, he says, no particular skills that distinguish creative and critical thinking. Instead, the difference is attitude (or "disposition"—certain ways of looking at things and the habit of looking at them in that way).

Critical thinking involves a questioning and doubtful attitude. It requires the giving of reasons for the views one holds on particular issues. To think critically, children need the chance to watch their parents make judgments and explain the reasons they made those judgments. These judgments can concern family matters, world events, books and music, and anything else. It is good to ask tough questions; and the result should be extended discussions, which the family encourages and celebrates.

Creative thinking, on the other hand, involves a disposition to make or perform things. Improvisation is important in creative thinking, because making or performing is about assembling things in new or different ways. But too much concern for a perfect finished project discourages creativity and learning. At home children can have access to tools and parents' talents—sewing, gardening, painting, cabinetmaking, or auto work, for example. Most parents have creative work that they might share with their children.

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, which developed this article, can provide a useful bibliography for parents and teachers on the topic of thinking critically and creatively. Just call 1-800/624-9120 or send an E-mail message to lanhamb@ael.org. To find out more about the ERIC system and its services, call ACCESS ERIC at 1-800/LET-ERIC.

The Courage Required of Adolescents

Teenagers have a lousy reputation. It's strange; they are not alien lifeforms—every adult was once a teenager, after all—but adults often regard them as such. What's the problem, really? Maybe it has to do with the rapid changes that come over us during the years 11-18. Continual change makes teenagers seem unpredictable. The lack of stable and predictable communities supporting teens can make change difficult to bear. But it really is unfair to find fault with teenagers just because they're growing up.

The major "task" of adolescence is to become your own person. Adolescents learn to make choices and commitments, follow through with them, and stand up independently in the world.

They need to be respected for taking on these tasks. After all, we respect *adults* who can do these things. They are complicated and courageous actions.

But teenagers swing back and forth between dependence and independence as they work on these tasks. It's easy for parents to get frustrated. And it's easy for a parent to assume that if the teenager would simply follow the plan that makes sense to a parent, things would be all right in the end.

Life is not so simple, of course—not for teenagers and not for adults. After all, in many ways, adults carry on the very same tasks of growth and development themselves—after adolescence. Adults, however, usually have a greater sense of who they are—what they value, what they need, and how best to get what they need—than do teenagers.

False starts, mistakes, poor judgment, or impulsive action are part of growing up. And like teenagers, adults encounter these same challenges. It's just that adults are usually better prepared to meet the challenges.

The main tasks of adolescence require teenagers to learn, and this kind of learning is not just a matter of getting the right answer. Most important is to understand the meaning of the right answer. And maybe "the right answer" is something that teenagers need to build up, responsibly, from lessons of experience. This is truly difficult work and it absolutely requires support from parents, relatives, and neighbors.

Once you grasp how complex adolescence is, you can better see teenagers for who they are. They are particularly delightful people—passionate, funny, insightful, and poignant. No other time in life puts people in the way of so much deeply felt experience.

To help adolescents grow up, parents need to be aware of their own growth. Everyone who is alive is changing, growing, and developing. It's easy for a middle-aged adult to forget this fact, especially when confronted with a difficult teenage problem. But parents who are working on their own growth are in a good position to understand teenagers and to respect what they are doing in the struggle to grow up and become good people in their own right.

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Practical Morals for Parents and Teens in the Age of AIDS

Twenty years ago, some people—especially the young—insisted that having sex with many partners meant being liberated. This sort of "liberation" substantially increases the risk of AIDS today. Teenagers—who lack experience and wisdom—are among those most at risk. What is responsible sexual behavior? How can parents help their teenagers understand? How does understanding relate to reducing the risks? Let's take a look at some key ideas.

The human brain includes something that scientists tell us looks suspiciously like the brain of a reptile. It seems to govern instincts. Having a "lizard brain" means that, for us, sexual behavior is a sure bet. It also means trouble, because lizards are not known for a well-developed sense of right and wrong.

When the rest of the brain abandons sexuality to the lizard brain, trouble is sure to follow. Without careful thought and wise action, the morals of a reptile—that is, none that make rational sense—will determine how we act. Sexual promiscuity is an almost certain result.

Most people think the word "promiscuity" applies only to sexual behavior and that it means having sex with many partners. Not true! It actually describes failure to make careful choices in *any circumstance*. Lizards can't avoid promiscuity; the lizard brain is all they've got. Humans have the ability to *choose* whether or not we will act like lizards. This is cause for hope, because *it is more natural for humans not to act like lizards.*

The change from child to adult is an especially dangerous time for adolescents in our society. From their earliest years, children watch television shows and movies that insist that "sex appeal" is a personal quality that

people need to develop to the fullest. Teenagers are at risk not only from AIDS but from this sort of mass-market encouragement. They encounter many other influences as well. Clearly, parents are in a tough spot. But there are some key ideas that help make sense of things.

Teenagers should, no doubt, learn the facts about human reproduction, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases. Health classes and sex education programs in the schools typically present such information.

But the challenge for any human is to make sense of facts in ways that are meaningful in life—in ways that help them think and make wise choices. Schoolroom lessons leave much to be desired in this regard. Commitments and values differ so widely in society that schools cannot be very thorough or consistent in their treatment of moral issues.

For this reason, it is probably more important for teenagers to see real-life examples of people who understand and deal responsibly with their sexual natures. Morals have to do with real-life commitments to people and things that have value. Morals are not abstractions. Parents and other influential adults (at school, at church, and in the community) need to show teenagers the difference between devotion and infatuation and help them make the distinction in their own hearts. Teenagers need to understand that satisfying sexual relationships—like other relationships—require careful thought and wise action.

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, which developed this article, can provide a useful bibliography for parents and teachers on the topic of morals and sex education for teenagers. Just call 1-800/624-9120 or send an E-mail message to lanhamb@ael.org. To find out more about the ERIC system and its services, call ACCESS ERIC at 1-800/LET-ERIC.

Playing for Keeps: Imagination and Young Children

My youngest child is about to leave home. I can't believe it. Where did all that time go, and all that worry about diapers, naps, and meals? What became of all that concern with walking, and talking, and reading, and schooling? I wish I'd been more alert, more observant. I had no idea that time was passing so fast!

What's left, though, are strong memories of those children at play, in layers, with each other. They played in pairs and as a threesome, at least until the oldest entered adolescence.

We lived in the country up to the time the youngest was four, and the kids relied on each other as playmates. They had several ongoing sagas, which amused us and figured in family talk, but we never really took in the details. These sagas were stories they acted out with each other. All we really knew about the stories was that they were compelling and went on for hours. They had names like "The Old Lost Witch" (the favorite, which lasted for years); and "Evidensky and Grevidensky" (we guessed that this one, which also had a long life, must have been about espionage); and also "Republicans and Democrats" (a fad that unfolded over several months during a Presidential election).

Play, of course, comes in many forms—infants amuse themselves (and do a great deal of learning) by exploring their bodies. The sorts of play that I remember so well with my kids, story or social play, is very common up through preadolescence (and can continue as healthy fantasy throughout adulthood). Once kids are mobile enough to explore the world with a degree of independence, construction play—as with blocks and found objects—becomes common. General "rough-housing" is another form of play, perhaps more common among boys.

Children's temperaments and upbringing help attract them to various sorts of play. All childhood play, however, has something to do with the imagination. Kids observe the world, take it into their minds, and project themselves into it in one fashion or another. Infants, exploring their bodies, develop an intuitive understanding of where they end and the world begins, for instance. In active physical play later on, kids use their bodies to define their personalities and to explore collaboration and conflict. In pretend-play (as with my kids), social interactions often help children explore the adult world. Construction play has to do with the human need and ability to make things.

But play is more than preparation for adulthood. Unhappy adults, for instance, certainly don't spend enough time playing. Play is about things that we find to have value in themselves. Play is real motivation; it expresses the intrinsic value and pleasure that we can all find in simply being alive.

A well-developed imagination helps us to play for keeps. Only if we exercise the power of imagination, can we *decide* how to act and what to do. The world, after all, is what we do and how we act in it. If we cannot imagine a better world, we cannot bring it into being. It starts in childhood.

This article was prepared by Craig Howley, director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. The Clearinghouse can provide a useful bibliography of resources about this topic. All resources listed in the bibliography are available from the Educational Resources Information Center. Just call 1-800/624-9120 or send an E-mail message to lanhamb@ael.org. To find out more about the ERIC system and its services, call ACCESS ERIC at 1-800/LET-ERIC.

What Did You Expect?

There are only a few "classic" studies in any field—ones that people remember and talk about for a long time. In education, one of these studies is "Pygmalion in the Classroom," conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson in 1968.

They told a group of teachers that certain students in their classes would be really smart, and they told the teachers to expect a lot from these students. But Rosenthal and Jacobson lied. The researchers just wanted to see if the rumor would help "average" kids learn better. The results suggested it did. Rosenthal and Jacobson woke up a lot of people and caused them to wonder if schools were not actually harming some students.

The research that followed, though not so daring, uncovered patterns that were even more shocking: The students who suffered most from low expectations were disproportionately poor and ethnically and culturally different from the 1950s image of the "ideal" family. This discovery was the educational equivalent of the economic tendency of "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." Some people, in fact, believe that the economy and schooling work together to disadvantage certain groups of people.

The research findings are very complicated. But, in general, teachers hold low expectations for kids when their interactions are negative and center on rules and controlling behavior. A personal disaster overtakes many students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as a result. They learn that effort is pointless. They "learn" to limit their own expectations.

The tragedy is that this result really is avoidable. But when certain groups are systematically disadvantaged in a society, we need to ask what is keeping us from systematically turning losers into winners. And we need to ask if our society can thrive if we can't accomplish a better education for so many people.

Classrooms with a healthy set of expectations encourage and empower students. They are productive places. Teachers direct questions to all students equally (boys and girls, all ethnic groups, and kids from all social classes). There is more discussion, and discussion involves more students. Teachers in such classrooms respect the minds of their students, in short. No one's contributions are underestimated, and everyone's contributions are respected.

Schools should be places where all children want to be. They should be places where children learn respect for their own minds. And the adults who work in them should be passionately devoted to cultivating knowledge and respect for the work of the mind. A number of organizations are working to help bring this vision into the lives of more students, teachers, and communities.

The National Committee for Citizens in Education is a good place to ask for information about ways to get involved. They can be reached (in the eastern time zone) at 1-800/NET-WORK (1-800/532-9832 for Spanish-speaking callers).

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